Character Mongers, or,
Trading in People on Paper
in the Long 18th Century
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Character Mongers
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Bulbous Noses, Underhung Mouths, and Cucumber Chins
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An exhibition at the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University October 10, 2016, through January 27, 2017
Curated by Rachel M. Brownstein and Leigh-Michil George
Cynthia Roman, organizing curator

Yale University Library
Samuel Johnson—“Dictionary Johnson,” “The Great Cham,” in eighteenth-century London—coined our title phrase when he called Frances Burney a “little character-monger.” Surely he condescended; but she boasted of the comment at least twice, in writing. Younger and in all respects slighter than the literary man caricatured by James Gillray as an owl, Burney (always “Fanny”) was an unmarried woman whose pushy father too eagerly sought social success in Dr. Johnson’s circle of clever people. She was a gifted mimic, a lively gossip, and a witty playwright, and she would be remembered for more than two centuries as a novelist, the author of (among other works of fiction) the original, genre-shaping *Evelina, or The History of a Young Lady’s Entrance into the World* (1778).

Johnson’s characteristically punchy phrase (like Stephen Colbert, much later, he most of the time stayed in character) nailed Burney as a...
hawker or seller of *characters*, by which he meant the imaginary people in her novels and plays as well as the acquaintances she mimicked for the fun of it, catching their characteristic facial, gestural, or linguistic expressions so as to evoke and mock them. Like the writers, painters, actors, and other wits of the time, Johnson and Burney relished the telling signs of character, a manner of speaking or slouching or a way of looking up or down that seemed to distill a person's essence, or character. The Swiss writer Johann Kaspar Lavater became wildly popular throughout Europe, in Johnson's and Burney's time, for deciphering and categorizing people's temperaments, emotions, and morals—their characters—by studying their physiognomies.

Today, we still call eccentrics and oddballs “characters” or even “real characters”—usually (if not always) indulgently, savoring their peculiarities as only human. In Burney's time the word “character,” singular and plural, had more meanings. A descriptive paragraph about an individual, a literary portrait of the kind written by Theophrastus or La Bruyère or Alexander Pope, was called a character; so was a letter of recommendation.

“She is all affability and condescension, and I doubt not but you will be honoured with some portion of her notice…. ”

Mr. Collins on Lady Catherine de Bourgh, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)
French) got used to seeing the people around them as characters—as well as souls, bodies, minds, or citizens. Pithy, pungent visual representations of well-known characters, printed on paper, became desirable commodities, bought and sold like the sometimes dubious wares of fishmongers, cheesemongers, even whoremongers. (The philosophical Dr. Johnson considered himself superior to novelists and playwrights concerned with such ephemera as manners and characters: compare Evelina to his Rasselas, or even his Lives of the Poets.)

Caricaturists (whose work is too often dismissed as “mere caricature”) notice and judge the signs and expressions (often fleeting) of character, usually to comic or satirical effect. This exhibition displays a range of representations of people that were invented, etched and engraved, printed, colored, and sold in and around the Age of George III. It was an age of revolutions and party politics, also an age of theatricals and high-society masquerades. A self-reflexive age, it nourished the rise of the novel. In this collection of satirical and gently humorous works, political and social satires, and fashionable, distressing, and even seditious views of powerful individuals, we aim to suggest the broad range written for an employee. Portraitists painted celebrated actresses and well-married ladies as characters in plays, or in myths. Whether these women had character, meaning a stable self or a good reputation or both, was often implicitly in question. “Most women have no Characters at all,” Pope wrote in “Of the Characters of Women” (1735), coyly ascribing that statement to “A Lady” and punning on a word that meant reputation, moral substance, and social role.

A character is more fundamentally, a letter of the alphabet, a sign or cipher to be read and interpreted. The brilliant caricaturists of the Age of George III sought to express, in an epigrammatic likeness, a person’s particularity or character in a recognizable turn of a neck or tilt of a nostril. Sometimes they hit off types (see George Cruikshank’s series, “London Characters,” 1827); sometimes they insisted on famous people’s defects. Encouraged by the caricaturists, the English public (and then the
“For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?”

Mr. Bennet in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* (1813)

deeply to the lively art of caricature. We also intend to show that the professional caricaturists of the period—Gillray, Rowlandson, Newton, Cruikshank, and others—were in the burgeoning modern business of seeing other people from a critical distance as characters made for the amusement of their neighbors.

The wares of the caricaturists informed views of politicians and world leaders; caricatures created celebrities and mocked them, and classified types—urban and rural, high and low, foreign and domestic. Comic caricatures—pointed and clearly on target—influenced readers and illustrators and writers of novels: see the characters in *Evelina* flying out of a print shop. When caricature became popular in London, psychology and sociology were in the distant future; so were more and bigger aggregations of people in cities, where they developed the habit and the knack of assessing the character of their neighbors, noting amusing characteristics and hats and gestures in order to locate useful and telling truths about human nature.

James Gillray, *Dilettanti Theatricals*, 1803
Bulbous Noses, Underhung Mouths, and Cucumber Chins

Leigh-Michil George

At the bottom of the title page to the first volume of *The Caricature Magazine, or Hudibrastic Mirror* (1808), a puffy-headed man holds a quizzing glass up to his right eye. His sneering gaze draws our attention to the lines from Horace’s *Satires*: *Quid rides? mutato nomine de te Fabula narratur* (Why are you laughing? Change the name and the story told is about you). The epigraph functions as both a warning—the joke is about you—and an invitation—are you in on the joke? Just above the quizzing-glass man, we see a plump gentleman heartily laughing at his portrait. Across from him sits an elegantly coiffed lady staring at an image of her own features. “Satire is a sort of glass,” Jonathan Swift wrote, “wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own” (*The Battle of the Books*). Here, however, the figures see...
“Nothing so true as what you once let fall, Most Women have no Characters at all.”

Alexander Pope, “Of the Characters of Women” (1735)

themselves reflected in the Hudibrastic mirror, or glass of satire, and they are amused. What elicits their delight? Is the man chuckling at the sight of his potbelly? Is the woman smiling at her underhung mouth? If so, why are both these figures fascinated, instead of dismayed, by what the printsellers Matthew and Mary Darly would call “the striking peculiarity” of their own bodies?

In A Book of Caricaturas (176-?), the Darlys define caricature as “the burlesque of Character…. It adds no beauties to the objects it represents, but exhibits a comical similitude, and in a kind of mimicry holds out its defects and blemishes in full view.” Why laugh at one’s “defects” and “blemishes”? Furthermore, why do the Darlys encourage men and women to “take notice” of the “distinguishing mark to be caricatured”? The Darlys recognize that caricature can be harsh and unrefined, but they distinguish their own work from such “infamous and meer [sic] catchpenny performances.” In A Book of Caricaturas, they advertise the art of drawing caricatures as a form of witty, genteel entertainment. Like the Darlys, the antiquarian Francis Grose describes drawing caricatures...
as a polite accomplishment, instead of as a “dangerous acquisition.” In *Rules for Drawing Caricatures: With an Essay on Comic Painting* (1788), Grose claims that the study of caricature may be “particularly useful” in “discover[ing] what constitutes the particular character of each person.” He instructs aspiring caricaturists to be on the lookout for convex heads, bulbous noses, underhung mouths, cucumber chins—for “odd faces that will both please and surprise.” The gallery of “odd faces” on display at the top of *The Caricature Magazine* title page includes a wide range of “peculiarities”: angular heads, snub noses, pouting mouths, retiring chins, and more. Among the spectacle of heads, there is a white-haired man, a tight-lipped smile on his face (perhaps a smirk), looking out, as if he is asking the viewer, “What is your distinguishing mark?” In other words, what are your defects and blemishes? What is your character?

Published by the bookseller Thomas Tegg, the several volumes that make up *The Caricature Magazine* feature etchings and engravings by and after many of the most popular British caricaturists of the late Georgian period: Thomas Rowlandson, James Gillray, Isaac Cruikshank, George Cruikshank, and G.M. (George Murgatroyd) Woodward. Customers could purchase individual prints from Tegg’s “caricature warehouse” at No. 111 Cheapside in London. Other print sellers, like S.W. (Samuel William) Fores of No. 50 Piccadilly, lent out folios of caricatures for an evening’s entertainment. Individuals who could not afford to purchase or borrow prints could often see them displayed in the city’s print shop windows. For example, at her establishment at No. 18 Old Bond Street, Hannah Humphrey published James Gillray’s satire of the vain, spendthrift Prince of Wales, *A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion* (1792), and later, at her shop at No. 27 St. James Street, Gillray’s lampoon of Lady Emma Hamilton’s affair with Admiral Nelson appeared as *Dido in Despair!* (1801).

As the market for caricatures grew in the late eighteenth century, critics increasingly began to rail against the crude and cruel jokes found in so many print shop windows. The author and educator Vicesimus Knox
“... a young healthy Child, well nursed, is, at a Year old, a most delicious nourishing, and wholesome Food; whether Stewed, Roasted, Baked, or Boiled; and ... it will equally serve in a Fricasie, or Ragoust.”

Jonathan Swift, “A Modest Proposal” (1729)

opposed the “ungenerous” satire of “personal deformity”: “Is a man to be put to shame, to stand as it were, in the pillory, a mark for scorn to point her finger at, because nature has given him a long nose, a protuberant belly, or an ill-shapen leg?” In the essay “On the Effect of the Caricaturas Exhibited at the Windows of Print-sellers” (1790), Knox insists that “all persons of consequence” and “official authority”—for example, kings, princes, and religious figures—should be off limits to caricaturists. One wonders what Knox, a clergyman himself, would have made of the skinny frame and cucumber chin of the Reverend Doctor Syntax. In The First Tour of Dr. Syntax, in Search of the Picturesque (1812), which includes illustrations by Rowlandson and verses by William Combe, the lean Dr. Syntax knows that his “figure was a joke/For all the town and country folk.” Yet, when Syntax encounters a fat bookseller, he cannot help himself from mocking the man “whose ample paunch/Was made of beef, and ham, and haunch.” The bookseller has spurned Syntax’s book of sketches, and the Reverend Doctor retaliates with ridicule. The “ample paunch” becomes a distinguishing mark of the bookseller’s true character: his

James Gillray, Germans Eating Sour-kraut, 1803
“monstrous belly” symbolizes greed. Rowlandson’s illustration, though, of the fat, greedy bookseller and the lean, impoverished Dr. Syntax is more comic spectacle than it is moral critique of the bookseller’s character. Syntax is just as ridiculous as the bookseller. The artist visually contrasts the two figures—the fat vs. the lean, the bulbous head vs. the angular head, the double chin vs. the cucumber chin—to evoke laughter.

Rowlandson and Combe’s *Tour of Dr. Syntax*, like the Darly and Grose drawing books and *The Caricature Magazine*, reveals a world in which print sellers and booksellers marketed their wares to a captive audience always on the lookout for a laugh. Men and women, high and low, sought out laughter while standing in front of a print shop window, leafing through an album of droll prints, or turning the pages of an illustrated volume of verse. And sometimes they discovered laughter in real life, in their own looking glasses or in the odd faces of neighbors and strangers. Even Jane Austen, who, like her witty heroine Elizabeth Bennet, “dearly love[d] a laugh,” could not help herself from looking for striking peculiarities. In March 1814, Austen wrote to her sister, Cassandra, “I have seen nobody in London yet with such a long chin as Dr. Syntax.”
“Sir Joshua. She has, certainly something of a knack at Characters; — where she got it, I don’t know, — and how she got it, I can’t imagine; — but she certainly has it. And to throw it away is —

“Mr. Sheridan. O she won’t, — she will write a Comedy; — she has promised me she will!”

Frances Burney, Letter to Susanna Burney, January 11, 1779
Isaac Cruikshank after G.M. Woodward
Title page for *The Caricature Magazine or Hudibrastic Mirror*
Etching with hand coloring
Thomas Tegg, London, ca. 1808
Folio 71; W87 508, vol. 1

James Gillray
*Doublures of Characters, or Striking Resemblances in Physiognomy*
Soft ground etching and stipple
Published November 1, 1798, by J. Wright for the *Anti-Jacobin*
798.11.01.03 + Impression 2

Defining Character

Thomas Rowlandson
*The Political Hydra*
Etching with stipple
Published December 28, 1788, by S.W. Fores
788.12.26.01

James Gillray
*Evidence to Character: Being a Portrait of a Traitor by his Friends & by Himself*
Etching on wove paper with hand coloring
Published October 1, 1798, by J. Wright
798.10.01.01 Impression 1

James Gillray
*Two Pair of Portraits presented to all the unbiased electors of Great Britain by John Horne Tooke*
Etching with hand coloring
Published December 1, 1798, by J. Wright for the *Anti-Jacobin*
798.12.01.02 Impression 1

Real Characters

James Gillray
*Monstrous Craws at a New Coalition Feast*
Etching and aquatint
Published May 29, 1787, by S.W. Fores
787.05.29.01.1++
James Gillray
_A Voluptuary under the Horrors of Digestion_
Stipple engraving with etching and hand coloring
Published July 2, 1792, by H. Humphrey
792.07.02.01+ Impression 1

James Gillray
_The Plumb Pudding in Danger_
Etching with hand coloring
Published February 26, 1805, by H. Humphrey
805.02.26.05+

James Gillray
_The Bottomless Pit_
Etching and stipple engraving with hand coloring
Published March 16, 1792, by H. Humphrey
792.03.16.01 Impression 1

Richard Newton
_A Bugaboo!
Etching with hand coloring
Published June 2, 1792, by W. Holland
792.06.02.01+

Representative Characters

James Gillray
_Dido in Despair!
Etching with engraving and stipple
Published February 6, 1801, by H. Humphrey
801.02.06.01+

James Gillray
_The Plumb Pudding in Danger_
Etching with hand coloring
Published September 24, 1796, by H. Humphrey
796.09.24.02+

John Nixon
_Politeness_
Etching with roulette and aquatint in sepia
Published December 8, 1779
779.12.08.01

James Gillray
_Germans Eating Sour-krout_
Etching with hand coloring
Published May 7, 1803, by H. Humphrey
803.05.07.01+

Thomas Rowlandson
_A Bill of Fare for Bond Street Epicures!
Etching with stipple and hand coloring
Published 1808 by Thomas Tegg
808.10.25.01 Impression 1

James Sayres
_Mr. Bannister in the Character of Miss Polly Peachum_
Etching with roulette and aquatint
Published 1781, London
781.00.00.24+

H. W. Bunbury
_Lord Derby Following Miss Farren_
Etching and aquatint with rocker
Published July 20, 1781, by J.R. Smith
Bunbury 781.07.20.01 Impression 1

James Sayres
_Dido in Despair!
Etching with engraving and stipple
Published February 6, 1801, by H. Humphrey
801.02.06.01+

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James Sayres
_Dido in Despair!
Etching with engraving and stipple
Published February 6, 1801, by H. Humphrey
801.02.06.01+
James Gillray
High-Change in Bond Street, ou, la Politesse du Grande Monde
Etching with hand coloring
Published March 27, 1796, by H. Humphrey
796.03.27.01+

James Gillray
This is a Sorry Sight!
Etching and aquatint with hand coloring
Published 1786?
In “The Caricatures of James Gillray”
[collection compiled by Francis Harvey]
Miscellaneous Series, vol. 7, verso of leaf 34
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

James Gillray
Shakespeare Sacrificed
Etching and aquatint with hand coloring
Published June 20, 1789, by H. Humphrey
789.06.20.02.3++

James Gillray
Dilettanti Theatricals
Etching with stipple and hand coloring
Published February 18, 1803, by H. Humphrey
In “The Caricatures of James Gillray”
[collection compiled by Francis Harvey]
Miscellaneous Series, vol. 11, leaf 2
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

James Gillray
Uncorking Old Sherry
Etching with hand coloring
Published March 10, 1805, by H. Humphrey
From “The Caricatures of James Gillray”
[collection compiled by Francis Harvey]
Miscellaneous Series, vol. 6, leaf 4
Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University

Metaphorical Characters

James Gillray
Copy of the frontispiece to volume 1 of Tristram Shandy
Engraving on wove paper; sheet 16.3 x 10.8 cm
Published 1760s?
760.00.00.02

Thomas Patch
Sterne and Death
Etching
Published 1768
768.00.00.04+

James Gillray
And Catch the Living Manners as They Rise
Etching and aquatint with stipple
Published May 7, 1794, by H. Humphrey
794.05.07.01

James Rowlandson
Dr. Syntax and the Bookseller
Aquatint with etching and hand coloring
Published May 14, 1812, by R. Ackermann’s
Repository of Arts in Poetical Magazine, vol. 4
61 P752

James Gillray
Affability
Etching with hand coloring
Published February 10, 1795, by H. Humphrey
795.02.10.01

James Gillray
Political Ravishment, or The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street in Danger!
Etching with hand coloring
Published May 22, 1797, by H. Humphrey
797.05.22.01+

James Gillray
This is a Sorry Sight!
Etching and aquatint with hand coloring
Published 1786?
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POLITICAL RAVIMENT, or The Old Lady of Threadneedle Street in Danger!...
Sources


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